

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Micro-Sociological Dynamics of Repression: How Interactions between Protesters and Security Forces Shaped the Bahraini Uprising

Isabel Bramsen

Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Copenhagen, DK  
ib@cric.ku.dk

---

The article applies a micro-sociological approach to investigate civil-military relations in a very concrete form: How do interactions between protesters and security forces shape the development of a conflict? Based on fieldwork in Bahrain and interviews with activists, journalists and opposition politicians, the article analyses the micro-sociological dynamics of how, despite great numbers and momentum, the Arab Uprising in Bahrain was repressed without, however turning into a military insurgence as in Syria. The article argues that the Bahraini regime was able to repress and silence the February 14 uprising through; 1) non-intervention during the momentum of the uprising, 2) injuring, torturing, and imprisoning rather than killing protesters, and 3) employment of expats in the military and police. Zooming in on micro-sociological processes provides not only a detailed narrative of the events, but also a recognition of dynamics that are often overlooked, notably how particular forms of repression make people gather in solidarity and outrage, energizing further counter-action, whereas other forms of repression involving torture, imprisonment, and injuring, but no visible, lethal violence can de-energize a protest movement.

---

**Keywords:** Bahrain; Repression; Micro-sociology; Arab Uprising; Protest

---

The uprising in Bahrain has been and continues to be overlooked in the Western media compared to the coverage of other Arab uprisings. This is not because the Bahraini people did not take to the streets in great numbers in 2011, as in for example Tunisia or Egypt. In fact, Bahrain was the country where the largest percentage of the population took part in the demonstrations.

Despite or perhaps because of the lack of focus on Bahrain the Bahraini uprising remains a very interesting example of an uprising that has been violently repressed by the regime without, as in Syria, turning into a military insurgence (yet). In this article, I will address the question of how the Bahraini regime has been able to repress the February 14 movement. I argue that the Bahraini regime repressed the uprising through:

- 1) Sectarian policies and non-intervention during the momentum of the uprising.
- 2) Injuring, torturing, and imprisoning rather than killing protesters.
- 3) Employment of expats in the military and police.
- 4) Western and Saudi support (material, silencing, and PR advice).

Although an important aspect, this article will not address the fourth component of repression, involving Western and Saudi support, as the main focus will be on the concrete relations and interactions between the Bahraini police and military, on the one hand, and the protesters, on the other.

Rather than assessing the structural conditions for repression as such, I will analyze the micro-interactions of repression and dissent, what one could consider concrete civil-military relations. I will apply the theoretical lenses of micro-sociology to understand how interactions between the security forces and the protesters shaped the development of the Bahraini uprising (Collins 2004; Bramsen & Poder 2014, 2018).

## Theory

The article applies American sociologist Randall Collins' micro-sociological theory (Collins 2004). Grand theories have become unfashionable within the social sciences, but although Collins' approach is micro-analytical, it can indeed be characterized as a 'grand theory', in the sense that it claims to be able to analyze and understand every aspect of the social world, from the tobacco industry and scholarly competition to sexual interaction, social movements, violence, and restorative justice (Collins 2004, 2009; Rossner 2013).

Existing schools of conflict research have different, relatively established assumptions about conflicts: that they are driven by rational calculation (Collier & Hoeffler 2004), grievances (Gurr 1970), traumas (Volkan 2006), or discursive contestation (Demmers 2012). In many ways, Collins' theory begins even before the issue of what drives actors, considering whether people have the energy to strive to do something in the first place and not what makes them do one thing or another (Collins 2004). It argues that individuals are energized by social rituals and that they strive to obtain such energy. The basic assumption is that emotional energy is a force of agency that individuals are charged with through so-called interaction rituals. An interaction ritual is a social gathering, like a funeral or demonstration, with bodily co-presence, a shared mood, barriers to outsiders, and a mutual focus of attention that generates group solidarity and emotional energy among the participants. If parties are humiliated, suppressed, and thus de-energized, they refrain from acting and engaging in further conflict. If people are instead energized with either positive emotional energy, such as pride, togetherness, and confidence, or negative emotional energy (Boyns & Luery 2015), such as anger and outrage (or both), they are likely to engage in conflictual action. The notions of negative, positive, and loss of emotional energy relate to Pearlman's (2013) conceptualization of dispiriting and emboldening emotions, but Collins' micro-sociological framework adds an important dimension on how these emotions are generated in specific situations. Bramsen and Poder (2014, 2018) identify three central types of interaction rituals in conflicts: solidarity interaction rituals, where the participants are energized with positive emotional energy; domination rituals, where the dominating party is energized while the other is de-energized; and conflict interaction rituals, where both parties are energized with negative emotional energy. In this sense, mobilization is a highly emotional phenomenon, both because emotions drive the action and inaction of conflicting parties, and because the rituals involved in mobilization, such as demonstrations, energize actors to engage in further action if they are successful (*Ibid.*; Collins 2001; Jasper 2001; Pearlman 2013). Collins' micro-sociology takes a different analytical starting point than most theories, namely situations, arguing that all social phenomena are generated and occur in particular situations and interactions, and that research therefore should have situations as its unit of analysis. In contrast to quantitative studies, this micro-sociological approach can reveal some of the everyday mechanisms and social dynamics that shape mobilization, conflict escalation, and sectarian tension.

## Method

The argument in this article is based on an analysis of video material of interactions between Bahraini military and police and the protesters, on interviews with Bahraini activists, opposition politicians, and journalists, and on participatory observation of a demonstration conducted on a fieldtrip to Bahrain in 2015. Due to censorship and systematic repression, Bahrain is a very difficult country to enter, let alone stay in. Before traveling to the country, I went to great lengths to erase all traces revealing that I had been doing research on Bahrain. I entered on a tourist visa on February 4, 2015 together with my partner, daughter, and parents-in-law, appearing to be on a family holiday. This was 10 days before the anniversary of the Arab Spring in Bahrain. We were all deported on February 13, one day before the anniversary, when my farther-in-law took a picture of a roadblock from our rented car. I stayed in the capital, Manama, but visited different Shia villages where most protests have taken place, some of which are embedded in Manama. I participated in one protest in the village of Bilal Alqadeem and conducted 11 semi-structured, tape-recorded interviews, including two group interviews and two Skype interviews in English. I had three contacts, who put me in touch with more informants before traveling to Bahrain. Nobody wanted to make appointments before I had entered the country. Bahrain is a small country, which makes it easy to get an impression of the opposition movement and talk to the majority of the leading activists. The YouTube video<sup>1</sup> material from Bahrain is very comprehensive and can give us a detailed impression of specific situations of violence with videos from the last four years of protesting. I collected the visual material online and through personal contacts among activists

<sup>1</sup> The video datasets are available online. Videos of violence (V): <http://violence.ogtal.dk/>. Videos of nonviolence (NV): <https://violence.ogtal.dk/index2.php>.

and journalists.<sup>2</sup> Given that the informants are activists, opposition politicians and journalists, and the videos are primarily recorded by activists, the analysis may appear biased. Not only because the interviews give voice to the opposition, and the perspective of the regime and its supporters is not equally represented, but also because my own standpoint as a researcher is not unaffected by listening to numerous stories of how informants have been tortured and humiliated. Moreover, I have a bias that activists have a right to protest and to ask for democratic changes in their country. This bias does not result in less rigorous research, but it requires being explicit about the normative standpoints that always, albeit to different degrees, shape research. Just as the parties to a conflict, including third parties, cannot be neutral, research about conflict and violence cannot renounce normativity (Bramsen, Nielsen & Vindelov 2016).

## Historical Background

Bahrain has been ruled by the Al Khalifa royal family since 1783. It was a British protectorate until 1971 and continues to enjoy close ties with Britain. Bahrain is also a close ally of Saudi Arabia and the U.S., hosting the U.S. Fifth Fleet. The Al Khalifa family is Sunni, like 30% of the population, whereas 70% are Shia. The Bahraini military and police only recruit Sunni Muslims and go so far as to invite Sunnis from Pakistan, Syria, and Yemen. Accordingly, the Bahraini military is composed of Sunnis of Bahraini origin and other nationalities, and most military personnel have good reason – financial as well as identity-related – to remain loyal (Albrecht & Ohl 2016). The Arab Spring revolution in Bahrain has roots in a decades-old struggle for political rights and equality, most recently with social unrest in the 1990s, where the Shia community in the country petitioned and demonstrated for reform, often supported by the Sunni community (Karolak 2012). With the death of H.H. Emir Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa in 1999, H.H. Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa became emir of the state of Bahrain. This gave rise to an era of hope, with optimism that the grievances that caused unrest in the 1990s would be addressed. H.M. King Hamad freed political prisoners and initiated a framework for reform, the National Action Charter, which was supported by 98.4% of the votes in a referendum where women had the right to vote. In 2002 Hamad declared Bahrain a kingdom, appointing himself king. The optimism soon shifted, as the reforms were seen to be merely cosmetic: The king and the upper house of the parliament (the members of which are selected by the king) must approve the bills put forward by the elected lower house before implementation. The 2002 elections were therefore boycotted by the Shia political societies. The biggest opposition party, Al-Wefaq, decided to take part in the 2006 elections. Although Al-Wefaq became the largest party in parliament, with 17 of the 40 seats, this was not translated into actual influence: 25 of the 27 bills presented by the lower house in 2007 were rejected by the upper house. The lack of concrete change and influence following the Al-Wefaq parliamentary experiment caused splinter groups to boycott the political system and tension to rise ahead of the 2010 elections (Karolak 2012).

## The Bahraini Uprising

The successful uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt inspired Bahraini activists and provided them with new energy and tactics for how to occupy central squares and topple the regime. The first calls to demonstrations mobilized around 6,000 people, but the protests grew in number, and determination increased with the killing of demonstrators (Bassiouni et al. 2011). The funerals gave room for mourning, grief, and the generation of unity in the movement. One protester describes how “attending his funeral had led back an anger among the people, we went to the graveyard, it was the first and angriest protest of my life” (personal communication, February 2015). The killings of protesters “inflame[d] the passions of fellow demonstrators and expand[ed] the number of participants in the movement” (Fattahi 2012). On February 16 the death of a protester drove thousands into the streets in Manama. Inspired by the occupation of the Tharir Square in Egypt, the Bahraini protesters occupied the Pearl Roundabout. One activist described how “[e]veryone was happy, optimistic, believing that we were very close to get our aspiration, our freedom, dignity and so on. So, we felt in that place, very proud of ourselves” (personal communication, February 2015).

## *Momentum and Movement Solidarity*

The protest movement initially established great momentum with increased public solidarity and coherence and limited or no references to sectarian divisions. People waved banners declaring unity between Shia and Sunni Muslims in the country, and activists posted Facebook pictures of being neither Sunni nor

<sup>2</sup> The Bahraini riot police also record many of the demonstrations. It would have been extremely useful to have access to this material and thus see the demonstrations from their perspective. I therefore asked a colleague to email them to me, but I never got a response.

Shia but 'Sushi'. Several Sunni Muslims also supported the uprising, and many experienced the time at the Pearl Roundabout as an anti-sectarian gathering of co-existence (Aldairy 2013). During this momentum the regime attempted to crack down on the uprising at 3:00 am the night between February 16 and 17. While people were asleep, the riot police, equipped with sticks, sound bombs, teargas, and shotguns, removed the demonstrators from the Pearl Roundabout, killing four. The following day funerals for the dead attracted thousands of participants. According to an Al-Jazeera documentary, the funerals were very intense and "the intensity of grief and determination made relatives faint" (Al-Jazeera 2011). The funeral turned into a protest march that started returning to the Pearl Roundabout, chanting "*salmya salmya*" (peaceful, peaceful). When the protesters were around 200 meters from the security forces protecting the area, they were shot at with live ammunition. One was killed and several injured (Video 16V).

The momentum of the uprising rendered it very difficult for the government in Bahrain to sustain the crackdown against the protesters. One activist reflected on how "the government was panicking: 'How can we stop these angry people? If we repress them more, it will lead to violence and it will speed up [the transition].' You know, the consequences would be very big" (personal communication, February 2015). A spokesperson from Al-Wefaq explains his role in convincing the regime to remove the troops from the Pearl Roundabout:

Then he [the king] offered the dialogue and we went into negotiations. I met with him and said, "Okay, pull out the army and the people will go to the Pearl Roundabout. Either you open it for them or you can stay here and then you deal with them and convince them to move, and then the youth will claim a victory by returning to the roundabout, and when they claim the victory, it will seem as though you cannot control their presence." (personal communication, February 2015)

As if he had listened to this advice, the crown prince went on air grieving the deaths, and the regime withdrew the army from the Pearl Roundabout, now only guarded by riot police and surrounded by barbed wire. The following day protesters approached the Pearl Roundabout with peaceful chants and roses. The intense pressure from demonstrators dominating the situation in loudness and numbers caused the police to retreat (Bramsen 2018). In the words of another participant, "unarmed peaceful protesters had opened the Pearl Roundabout without anything but determination" (personal communication, February 2015). The Pearl Roundabout was characterized by a festival-like atmosphere of euphoria and joy (personal communication, February 2015). The solidarity among the participants was high, with people preparing food for each other, chanting, and artists singing and performing. Activists used the national flag to unite people as a nation, and slogans of sectarian unity prevailed:

We were repeating day by day that Sunni and Shia are brothers. This country is not for sale, this land is for us and for you [...] we were crying to them: "Don't believe the regime! The regime wants us to be enemies." (personal communication, February 2015)

The Bahraini regime did several things to sectarianize the uprising. It portrayed the revolutionary movement as exclusively Shia, supported or possibly even directed by Iran. It mobilized Sunni Islamists to stage public support for the regime in demonstrations (Fattahi 2012). One concrete attempt at sectarianizing the conflict in Bahrain occurred when the government suggested dialogue with the demonstrators. Rather than dialogue between the regime and the activists, they wanted the king to sit at the end of the table and representatives of the two sects to discuss the opposition's claims. The activists refused to engage in these talks for the reason that doing so would turn the conflict into a sectarian conflict between two sects rather than a political conflict between the state and the people (Andersen 2011).

### ***Movement Fractionalization***

As time passed and the protesters were allowed to remain at the Pearl Roundabout, however, the unity of the protesters began to crumble (Bramsen 2018). Without more killings of protesters, the regime's lethal repression no longer kept the movement together in solidarity, and a split developed between the reformists and the revolutionaries: those demanding the overthrow of the regime and those who aspired for reform. An activist describes how:

Within the opposition, you started to have the people who supported the political societies who said dialogue is the way to go and all you need to do is to create situations that can be used as a

bargaining chip in the dialogue. And you had those who disagreed with them. And you had those who said, “No we need to start escalating, we need to build pressure.” They were seen as being radicals. (personal communication, November 2014)

The internal lines of division in the movement concerned not only the goal of the movement, regime change, or reform, but also what types of action should be taken to reach this goal. On several occasions, the February 14 movement arranged demonstrations which the political societies had advised against. An opposition politician from Al-Wefaq argued that:

Such escalation, demands to overthrow the regime, and the call for a republic – the demonstration near the palace and the blockage of the financial harbor, this won’t be tolerated. And this will cause us to lose part of the Sunnis who supported the movement, more assuredness from the GCC<sup>3</sup> to intervene and not support from the international community. (personal communication, February 2015)

Whereas the revolutionaries, inspired by the momentum of the Arab Spring, had high hopes that they could replicate the regime change in Egypt and Tunisia, Al-Wefaq had a different view on the prospects for and pace of change: “We know the severity of the situation in Bahrain: the demography, the Sunni/Shia issue, the regional context with the Saudi, the other GCC regimes” (personal communication, February 2015). According to Fattahi:

The ambiguity surrounding the precise political ends of the demonstration movement alarmed the ruling Sunni minority, including its moderate bloc, who feared for their life, property, and power if Shiites were to abolish the Sunni monarchy and establish a Shiite-dominated republic. (2012)

Matthiesen (2013) has documented how the internal lines of division in the movement became visible between radical Shia groups, like Shiriza, supporters of Hezbollah, youth groups like the February 14 coalition, and the more radical coalition for a republic. Moreover, the Sunni supporters of the movement largely drifted away. Matthiesen describes his meeting with a politically active Sunni woman who had initially joined the demonstrations at the Pearl Roundabout, but later joined pro-government Sunni groups, partly due to her dissatisfaction with the Shia angle that some slogans had taken (Matthiesen 2013: 68).

Moreover, incidents in villages and schools outside Manama, away from the anti-sectarian atmosphere at the Pearl Roundabout, increased sectarian tensions, thereby contributing to the displacement of the lines of conflict of a nation against a dictatorship to one of two competing sects. The first major sectarian incident occurred on March 3 in Hama Town, an area with a mixed Sunni-Shia population. According to the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report (Bassiouni et al. 2011), fighting broke out between Shia students who had participated in a protest earlier that day and a group of naturalized Sunni teenagers, and it escalated to a street battle with knives, sticks, and metal rods. To counter the increasing sectarian tension and increase national unity, activists organized a human chain between the Al-Fateh Mosque in Juffair and the Pearl Roundabout on 4 March; however, incidents with sectarian connotations continued to occur.

Tension and a sense of insecurity were on the rise. A researcher witnessing the events described how:

From March 7 more and more helicopters were deployed and not only during the demonstrations – they hang in the air throughout the night. [...] The last night I was there [12–13 March], the atmosphere was really uncomfortable: constant helicopters, and everywhere in the city demonstrators drove in cars and used the horn to the slogan, honk, honk, honk-honk [the rhythm of the slogan down, down Hamad]. (Andersen, email correspondence)<sup>4</sup>

According to the BICI report, a “turning point” occurred on March 13 (Bassiouni et al. 2011: 126), when several events “caused a wave of fear” (Bassiouni et al. 2011: 126), and increased tension among the Bahraini citizens played out. Notably, a disputed incident at the University of Bahrain on 13 March left many injured. There are conflicting accounts of what happened – whether pro-government students began to attack and harass anti-government student demonstrations, or whether armed individuals, not students, were led onto

<sup>3</sup> Gulf Cooperation Council.

<sup>4</sup> Email correspondence with Senior Researcher Lars Erslev Andersen, translated by the author.

the campus and attacked demonstrators. Several activists from the Pearl Roundabout reportedly drove to the University of Bahrain after hearing about the events and joined the anti-government students (Al-Jazeera 2011; Bassiouni et al. 2011).

Already on March 7 activists had decided to escalate the conflict further and expand the demonstration from the Pearl Roundabout to the financial district. One activist describes how:

People started going out from the Pearl Square to the financial harbor. That's what people thought was necessary for escalation in 2011. We're here in the Pearl Square, the government is so far quiet about it. We need to escalate. We need to get things to move. (personal communication, November 2014)

On March 13 this escalation culminated in a blockade of the entrance to the financial district and fights between protesters and the police. One video shows riot police attacking protesters on a hill between a highway and the Pearl Roundabout (Video 40). Other videos show protesters chasing outnumbered police officers who retreat to their cars (Video 41). A Canadian English teacher who could watch and film the events at the Pearl Roundabout from his balcony describes how:

I watched the events unfolding from my windows and from the car park (until teargas intervened) and eventually the police retreated, much to the delight of the protesters. The battle had lasted for most of the morning and only ended when the police knew that they did not have the numbers. (Mitchell 2016)

### ***The Crackdown***

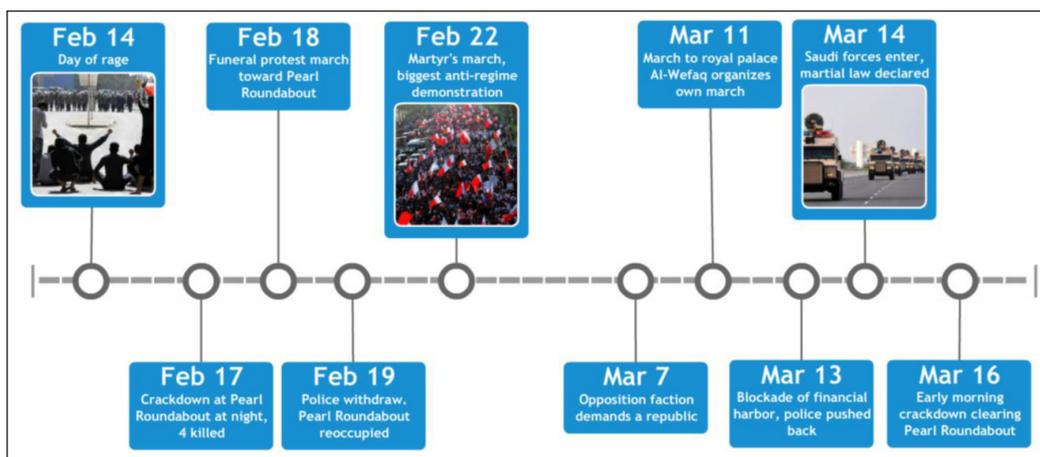
On March 14 the Bahraini government called for reinforcements from the Saudi army, which entered with tanks the same day. Martial law was declared the night between March 15 and 16, and the Pearl Roundabout and other protest sights were cleared. The regime did not need much manpower to disperse the protesters this time, as the Pearl Roundabout “was far less crowded Wednesday morning than it had been in recent days, as many protesters had returned to their villages to protect their homes. Those who remained did not put up a stiff fight” (Birnbaum 2011). The Pearl Statue and Roundabout that had turned into symbols of the movement were demolished, and a highway that remains closed at the time of writing was established in its place.

What can account for the success of the crackdown on March 15, when the one on February 17 failed? Many observers ascribe the success of the second crackdown on Bahraini protesters to the loyalty of the army, comparing it to the civil-military relations in Tunisia and Egypt (e.g. Nepstad 2011, 2013). However, the loyalty of the army was constant throughout the revolution, defections never occurring. According to Brownlee, Masoud and Reynolds (2015), the assistance from the Saudi army cannot explain the successful crackdown, as it did not take part in the repression of protesters, and the Bahraini forces never lacked the coercive capacity to repress the movement. However, although the official line is that the Saudi forces did not intervene directly, there are indications that they “free(d) up Bahraini’s own military and security forces to partake in a binge of repression” (Gelvin 2012: 138) or even took part in the crackdown (personal communication, February 2015).<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, as I have described, fear and tension increased in the population during the week leading up to the crackdown. The unity, solidarity, and momentum of the movement peaked immediately after the Pearl Roundabout had been reoccupied in mid-March. Hereafter, when the regime allowed the protesters to occupy the Pearl Roundabout without further killings, the internal divisions grew. A lot of people still demonstrated at the Pearl Roundabout (enough to disturb traffic and force back security forces on March 13), but the movement coherence was decreasing (**Figure 1**).

The days leading up to the crackdown are tricky. On the one hand, the protesters were forceful enough to push back the police. On the other hand, the movement was increasingly divided, with sectarian tensions rising in society in general and, perhaps more importantly, divisions between revolutionists and reformists. Some of the protesters escalated the situation by blocking the financial district and marching to the royal palace, but the big demonstrations with up to 100,000 participants did not take place in locations that could meaningfully challenge the regime. Hence, the regime was threatened and forced to either “engage in real dialogue with the protesters, or to forcibly remove them” (Andersen 2011). At the same time, however, it was

<sup>5</sup> <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/3/bahrain-uprisinginterventionsaudiariaemiaemirates.html>.



**Figure 1:** Timeline of the Bahraini uprising, February/March 2011.

a disunited opposition standing on their doorstep that did not count the biggest opposition party, Al-Wefaq, and its many followers – and with waning Sunni participation. Thus, the uprising was more easily repressed.

### ***After the Crackdown***

The Bahraini revolution was not completely silenced in 2011. When the curfew ended in the summer of 2011, protesters again took to the streets in great numbers at marches organized by Al-Wefaq. These marches were banned in 2014, however, and the leader of Al-Wefaq was imprisoned. Although periods with sporadic, small, and (in certain periods) daily demonstrations have occurred since then, the revolution is significantly weakened.

Since the crackdown in March 2011 the Bahraini regime has systematically succeeded in demobilizing the movement through de-energizing repression. First, the humiliating practice of taking away national passports, imprisoning, torturing, and firing many of the people who participated in the protests severely de-energized the movement. The situation for the Shia community has worsened considerably since 2011, many people losing their jobs, and protesters, opposition politicians, and revolutionaries being imprisoned (personal communication, August 2014 and February and March 2015). An active member of the political party Wa'ad (National Democratic Action Society) described this 'de-energization':

In four years, I've aged maybe 40 years instead of only four. Because every day you're facing an issue, how you're going to build your life because you're not allowed to work. You're not allowed to do anything. If they catch you at a checkpoint, you'll be humiliated. If they say that they will arrest you, they'll come to your house. (personal communication, February 2015)

This type of repression corresponds to more indirect forms of repression: "civil liberties restrictions" (Davenport 2007) or "channeling strategies" (Earl 2003). Second, the regime has generally refrained from killing protesters since 2011, instead generally opting for torturing, injuring, and humiliating them. An activist described how the riot police "shoot people where you try not to kill them – injure them as much as you can, but not kill them," (personal communication, August 2014) and an opposition politician likewise described how:

We don't have martyrs like we had before; every week, every week, every week people were on the streets and processions like that. But now they have told them, and I think they have new instructions to like do damage but not to kill. So they shoot you in the face, you can lose an eye. (personal communication, February 2015)

This amounts to what Davenport (2007) refers to as "personal integrity violations", just like killings in the streets. Based on my observations from Bahrain and Syria, however, I would argue that killings in the streets versus injuring and torturing have a different impact on mobilization, although both are considered personal integrity violations. The former angers people, generating moral outrage, bringing people together at funerals and thus energizing them for further protest action. On the other hand, torturing and injuring, although equally forceful, are more likely to de-energize individuals in fear and despair, thereby leading to inaction.

This dynamic requires that researchers draw more fine-grained distinctions between types of repression. From an activist perspective, the mobilizing effects of repression are known as ‘backfiring’, because they have the opposite effect as intended by the regime. Brian Martin has argued that whether repression backfires or not depends on the visibility and degree to which an action is perceived as unjust/disproportionate (Martin 2007). Obviously, it matters that killing in public is more visible than torturing in prisons, but I would argue that there is more to it. First, much of the torture in prisons has also been documented, although often with a delay. The Bahrain Centre for Human Rights has detailed visual and interview documentation of torture in Bahraini prisons, as does the Bahraini Independent Commission of Inquiry. But there is a difference between *knowing* about a given atrocity, which *emotions* it may evoke, and how these emotions are channeled into mobilization (or not). Pictures and/or descriptions of torture may disgust and discourage the observer, whereas watching killings of demonstrators live or gathering for a funeral seems to enrage and energize spectators and participants. Mobilization is a social process that requires that people not only know about injustice, but are also sufficiently energized to act upon their indignation. If an activist is killed, people gather at funerals that can potentially turn into protest marches and strengthen the movement. If people are imprisoned, tortured, or injured, this seems to scare away other protesters rather than mobilize them in anger and grief.

The de-energization in Bahrain was also visible in the demonstration in which I participated in 2015 in the village Bilal al-Qadeem. It followed the same route as most of the daily (often two daily) demonstrations in the village, and it was clear that demonstrations were very routinized; everyone knew when we would meet the riot police. In this demonstration and in the videos from this period the rhythm of chanting and marching is much slower than in videos from the beginning of the uprising (Videos 1-10NV), which indicates intensity.

### **The Composition of the Military as a Challenge for Nonviolent Resistance**

Several researchers have rightly argued that the composition of the Bahraini military and police can account for the lack of defections in the Bahraini military vis-à-vis other places like Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria (Nepstad 2011, 2013; Albrecht and Ohl 2016). Here I will address how the Sunni composition of the Bahraini security affects the relations to the protesters. I argue that the expats in the security forces pose a great challenge to the protesters, as they often cannot understand each other’s languages and cultural norms. Ketchley (2014) has described how tactics of fraternization were part of what generated the bond between protesters and Egypt’s army. Such tactics are challenged in Bahrain due to cultural and linguistic barriers. One protester, for example, explained that “one of the problems in Bahrain is communication, how can you communicate with the police force if they only speak Urdu? You don’t even speak a common language, so when you are standing there, screaming, Salmya Salmya (Peaceful Peaceful) the police officers have no idea what you are saying, all they see is screaming protesters” (personal communication, August 2014). She described a situation where her sister and her father faced the riot police:

They are standing there and there are tanks on the road, and they are telling everyone to go home, and so my father starts speaking to him because he was Bahraini, the guy in the tank was Bahraini which doesn’t happen often at all, right? and my dad starts speaking to him saying: you’re Bahraini and I’m Bahraini, you have kids and I have kids. And we share the same country, the same bread, we walk on the same soil, how can you shoot me? (personal communication, August 2014).

The activist father and daughter told them that they would not move and then suddenly police forces with non-Arab background showed up and attacked them. The protesters thus found that it is more difficult for activists to use common nonviolent tactics of appealing to common interests and culture with the riot police when they are expats.

Whereas the employment of foreign personnel in the police and military forces in Bahrain certainly remains a challenge for activists, it can be considered one of the reasons why the Bahraini uprising has not spiraled into a civil war, because the Bahraini security forces are seen as representing the government and, to a much lesser extent, the Sunni community. Whereas in, for example, Syria the soldiers and in particular the Shabiha are seen as representing not only the regime, but also to some extent the Alawite community, the protesters that I talked to were very aware of the security forces representing the regime, not the Sunni community. A recurrent impression among the activists and opposition politicians whom I talked to was that the Bahraini security forces are clearly following the orders of the regime (and my own experience with being deported confirms this). Also, Bahraini police and military are considered stupid, but not evil. A

telling joke among activists is that the military and police are recruited by asking the group of applicants to go to the left if they can read and write and to go to the right if they cannot. Those who remain and cannot understand the question get the job.

## Conclusion

This article has addressed how the Bahraini regime repressed the February 14 uprising through 1) non-intervention during the momentum of the uprising, 2) injuring, torturing, and imprisoning rather than killing protesters, and 3) employment of expats in the military and police. Initially the killings of protesters in 2011 enraged and engaged more people and thus gave rise to mobilization. Quickly, however, the Bahraini government changed its tactics and allowed the occupation of the Pearl Roundabout, while at the same time engaging in subtler forms of repression and challenging the unity of the movement. This did not initially hinder great demonstrations; in fact, the percentage of the population in Bahrain participating in demonstrations was greater than in any other Arab country. However, with no external conflict energizing and uniting the movement and with government strategies attempting to displace the conflict lines – from a conflict between the regime and its people to one between two sects – sectarian tensions and related tensions over the comprehensiveness of the demands grew. Parts of the movement organized more escalatory demonstrations, blocking the financial district and marching to the royal palace, whereas the biggest opposition party, Al-Wefaq, advised against such escalatory actions and organized its own events. In mid-March 2011, where fears in society and division had increased, parts of the movement escalated to the financial harbor, physically forcing back the riot police – that is, escalation at a time of low movement unity. The regime again attacked the Pearl Roundabout, this time with the help of Saudi Arabia, which, although no reports confirm its direct intervention, further increased the psychological pressure on the movement, as the Saudi forces are widely feared in much of the Bahraini society. The regime tore down the Pearl Statue that had come to symbolize the revolutionary movement and established a highway that remains closed for Bahrainis to substitute the Pearl Roundabout. The strategy since then has been to de-energize revolutionaries by not killing activists (which would have provoked anger and a basis for further mobilization, not least at funerals), but instead slowly and silently suppressing the Shia community and those engaged in activism by injuring, imprisoning, torturing, and denying them their basic rights.

An important dimension affecting the civil-military relations or protester-riot police relations in Bahrain is the employment of expats in the police and army. On the one hand, this poses a challenge for protesters, as it hinders communication and makes it more difficult to appeal to common values and thus have the security forces side with or at least not attack the protesters. On the other hand, this may be an important aspect of why the Bahraini revolution has not spiraled into a civil war, as the security forces are not seen as representing fellow Bahraini Sunnis, but merely the regime, and thus relations against other Bahraini Sunnis are not considered legitimate.

The micro-sociological approach applied in this article suggests a new way of comprehending civil-military relations in their very concrete form: How do interactions between protesters and the security forces shape how a conflict develops? Also, it takes into account the emotional forces that shape if and how people are able to act rather than merely the rational calculations behind this. What is gained by zooming in on such micro-processes is not only a detailed narrative of the events, but also recognition of dynamics that would otherwise not come out in other types of analysis, for example how particular forms of repression make people gather in solidarity and outrage, energizing further counter-action, whereas other forms of repression involving torture, imprisonment, and injuring, but no visible, lethal violence, de-energize a protest movement.

The micro-sociological approach can likewise shed light on how civil-military interactions shape other conflict developments and at least in part account for how conflicts take different pathways depending on which of the parties is able to dominate the situation and remain united. Elsewhere I have compared the micro-dynamics shaping the first period of the Bahraini uprising to the uprisings in Syria and Tunisia. In Syria, one could argue, the demonstrations were met with increasingly lethal force, which continued to enrage and energize further mobilization. When conflict lines were displaced, as in Bahrain, this split the movement *as well as* the regime, in particular the military, which prompted an escalatory process in which neither party was able to dominate the situation in military or emotional terms (Bramsen, 2019). In Tunisia, on the other hand, activists were able to overthrow the regime because they mobilized large and diverse parts of the population and were able to maintain unity and momentum, whereas the regime suffered from miscommunication and lack of internal trust (Bramsen, 2018).

## Competing Interests

The field research for the article is supported by generous funding by the Danish Institute in Damascus.

## References

- Albrecht, H., & Ohi, D.** (2016). Exit, Resistance, Loyalty: Military Behavior during Unrest in Authoritarian Regimes. *Perspectives on Politics*, 14(1), 38–52. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592715003217>
- Aldairy, A.** (2013). Coming Down from the Tower. In: Cassel, M., Al-Zubaidi, L., & Craven Roderick, N. (eds.), *Writing Revolution: The Voices from Tunis to Damascus*, 130–157. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Al Jazeera.** (2011, August 4). Shouting in the Dark. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xaTKDMYOB0U>.
- Andersen, L. E.** (2011, June 13). Bahrain in the Shadow of the Libya War. *Open Democracy*. Retrieved from: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/lars-erslev-andersen/bahrain-in-shadow-of-libya-war>.
- Bassiouni, M. C., Rodley, N., Al-Awadhi, B., Kirsch, P., & Arsanjani, M. H.** (2011). *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*. Manama, Bahrain: Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry. Retrieved from Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry. Retrieved from: <http://www.bici.org.bh/BICReportEN.pdf>.
- Birnbaum, M.** (2011, March 17). Bahrain Arrests Opposition Leaders as Crackdown Intensifies. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/bahrain-unleashes-assault-against-protesters-camp-in-capital/2011/03/16/ABHGtYg\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/bahrain-unleashes-assault-against-protesters-camp-in-capital/2011/03/16/ABHGtYg_story.html).
- Boyns, D., & Luery, S.** (2015). Negative Emotional Energy: A Theory of the “Dark-Side” of Interaction Ritual Chains. *Social Science*, 4(1), 148–70. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci4010148>
- Bramsen, I.** (2019). Escalation or De-mobilization? Diverging Dynamics of Conflict Displacement and Violent Repression in Bahrain and Syria. In: Bramsen, I., Poder, P., & Wæver, O. (eds.), *Resolving International Conflict: Dynamics of Escalation, Continuation & Resolution*. London: Routledge.
- Bramsen, I.** (2018). How Civil Resistance Succeeds (or Not): Micro-Dynamics of Unity, Timing and Escalatory Actions. *Peace & Change*, 43(1), 61–89. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/pech.12274>
- Bramsen, I., Nielsen, J. B., & Vindeløv, V.** (2016). *International Konfliktløsning*. København: Samfundslitteratur.
- Bramsen, I., & Poder, P.** (2014). Theorizing Three Basic Emotional Dynamics of Conflicts: A Situational Research Agenda. *Peace Research: Canadian Journal of Peace and Conflict*, 46(2), 51–86, 126.
- Bramsen, I., & Poder, P.** (2018). Emotions in Conflict and Conflict Transformation, Handbok article, Berghof Foundation. Retrieved from: [https://www.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Handbook/Articles/bramsen\\_poder\\_handbook.pdf](https://www.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Handbook/Articles/bramsen_poder_handbook.pdf).
- Brownlee, J., Masoud, T. E., & Reynolds, A.** (2015). *The Arab Spring: Pathways of Repression and Reform*. First edition. Oxford & New York, NY: Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199660063.001.0001>
- Collier, P., & Hoeffler, A.** (2004). Greed and Grievance in Civil War. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 56(4), 563–95. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oep/gpf064>
- Collins, R.** (2001). Social Movements and the Focus of Emotional Attention. In: Goodwin, J., Jasper, J. M., & Polletta, F. (eds.), *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226304007.003.0002>
- Collins, R.** (2004). *Interaction Ritual Chains: Princeton Studies in Cultural Sociology*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400851744>
- Collins, R.** (2009). Micro and Macro Causes of Violence. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 3(9), 9–22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4119/UNIBI/ijcv.45>
- Davenport, C.** (2007). State Repression and Political Order. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 10(1), 101–23. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.10.101405.143216>
- Demmers, J.** (2012). *Theories of Violent Conflict: An Introduction*. New York, NY: Routledge. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203869512>
- Earl, J.** (2003). Tanks, Tear Gas, and Taxes: Toward a Theory of Movement Repression. *Sociological Theory*, 21(1), 44–68. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9558.00175>
- Fattahi, L.** (2012). Nonviolent Action Strategy: Lessons from Bahrain’s Demonstration Movement. *Al Naklah, Online Journal on Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization (spring)*. The Fletcher School, Tufts University.
- Gelvin, J.** (2012). *The Arab Uprisings, What Everyone Needs to Know*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Gurr, T.** (1970). *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Jasper, J. M.** (2001). Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 37(1), 285–303. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-081309-150015>
- Karolak, M.** (2012). Escalation of Social Conflict during Popular Upheavals: Evidence from Bahrain. *CEU Political Science Journal*, 7(2), 173–95.
- Ketchley, N.** (2014). 'The Army and the People Are One Hand!' Fraternization and the 25th January Egyptian Revolution. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 56(1), 155–86. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417513000650>
- Martin, B.** (2007). *Justice Ignited: The Dynamics of Backfire*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Matthiesen, T.** (2013). *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring that Wasn't*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Briefs, an imprint of Stanford University Press.
- Mitchell, T.** (2016, July 26). *A Room with a View: An Eyewitness to the Pearl Uprising*. Blog post. Retrieved from: <https://www.zedbooks.net/blog/posts/bahrain-pearl-uprising-eyewitness-account/>.
- Nepstad, S. E.** (2011). Nonviolent Resistance in the Arab Spring: The Critical Role of Military-Opposition Alliances: Nonviolence, Mutiny and the Arab Spring. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 17(4), 485–91. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1662-6370.2011.02043.x>
- Nepstad, S. E.** (2013). Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring: Exploring Military Defections and Loyalty in Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria. *Journal of Peace Research*, 50(3), 337–49. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343313476529>
- Pearlman, W.** (2013). Emotions and the Microfoundations of the Arab Uprisings. *Perspectives on Politics*, 11(2), 387–409. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592713001072>
- Rossner, M.** (2013). *Just Emotions: Rituals of Restorative Justice*. Clarendon Studies in Criminology. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199655045.001.0001>
- Volkan, V.** (2006). *Killing in the Name of Identity: A Study of Bloody Conflicts*. Virginia: Pitchstone.

**How to cite this article:** Bramsen, I. (2019). Micro-Sociological Dynamics of Repression: How Interactions between Protesters and Security Forces Shaped the Bahraini Uprising. *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 2(1), pp.9–19. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.13>

**Submitted:** 24 October 2018    **Accepted:** 15 January 2019    **Published:** 25 January 2019

**Copyright:** © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



*Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Scandinavian Military Studies.

**OPEN ACCESS** 